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saturday, september 27, 2008

Black & White in COLOR #4: The Munsters!

BOO!

Happy Halloween, everybody! That makes it just about prime time for the latest B&WnC installment; this time around showcasing Universal's favorite family of fright *The MUNSTERS*... in COLOR.

Yeah, sure I know *Munsters Go Home* was shot in color... but the makeup they used was altered for the big screen and on the green side. Considerably different than these great Frankenstein-accurate shots of Herman from the pilot film.

about me

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Curiously the first Munsters pilot (also shot in color) did not yet include Yvonne Decarlo in the cast. Instead, the test audience was treated to the e'en more Morticia-esque character Phobe (above) --played by Joan Marshall-- in place of Lily. Joan was probably best known for her dual-role (playing both sexes) in William Castle's Psychotronic soap-opera *Homicial (1961)*. Can't say I'm sorry she didn't do the series but I can say that ol' Joan had some intense bone structure goin' on --She's really more Chas Addams looking than even Carolyn Jones was.

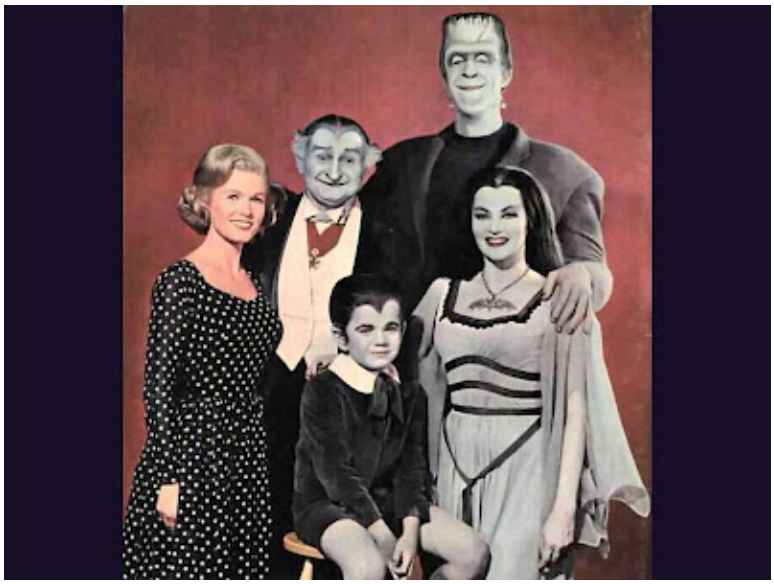
2009 is Bustin' Loose All Over!
R. I. P. Bettie Page
Black & White in COLOR #5 : The CREATURE!

archives

April 2006
May 2006
June 2006
July 2006
August 2006
September 2006
October 2006
November 2006
December 2006
January 2007
February 2007
April 2007
June 2007
July 2007
August 2007
October 2007
November 2007
December 2007
January 2008
February 2008
June 2008
July 2008
August 2008
September 2008
November 2008
December 2008
January 2009
February 2009
March 2009
April 2009
June 2009
January 2010

I Power Blogger

The first season cast including Beverly Owen as Marilyn. After 13 episodes she was replaced as by Pat Priest. (At her own request, might I add -- actually Beverly **wanted** to quit the show 'cause she was a-missin' her boyfriend who lived back east real REAL bad (according to Al Lewis at least). Eddie's makeup was still evolving at this point... (Butch still has his own hair!)

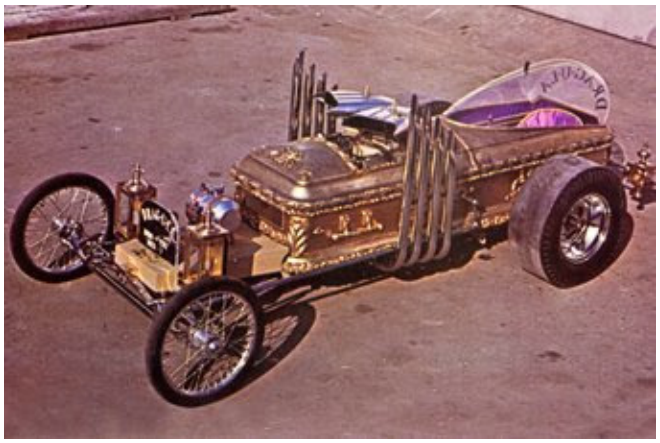


Another great shot of Herman and Lily. (I thought at first this was a painting by Ken Kelley... but it ain't.)

Oh man! Munster colorforms? I always hated that they only came with the one background. (No damn car either... that definitely woulda ticked me off.)
Colorforms were, for the uninitiated, sort of like the earliest form of Flash animation.
Think of it as "Flash manual".

Viva, George Barris!
The fusion of the the Monster craze and the Hot-rod craze in the show's second season gave it -- according to many fans -- a definite edge over the abc's *The Addams Family.*

There was only one Drag-U-La (Grandpa's coffin car,) built for the show. There have been several replicas built since 1967, but the original now hangs from the ceiling in the Planet Hollywood restaurant in Atlantic City.



Okay so this one ain't color... but it's still a fun behind the scenes shot with Fred and Yvonne.

Seems like everybody had a band back then...

1313 Mockingbird Lane

The location that the Munsters lived on was constructed largely for the 1946 film *So Goes My Love.* The two houses used for the film were constructed on stage 12. In 1950 the stock houses from the sound stage were reconstructed on the new Colonial Street set. The future Munster house was at that time "The Maxim House" and was featured in the movie *One Desire* in (1955).
Universal Studios soon found itself in the pre-fab Victorian home business. These blueprints would be mixed and matched at Universal for the next 20 years. Below is a rare shot of The Munsters house under construction in 1950.

Universal studios kicked ass in the 1960's -- here comes the tram down what is now *choke* Wisteria Lane (the *Desperate Housewives* set) passing both *The Munsters* House and the Psycho-type construct from *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken*. Here's some other nifty shots of of the cast and the house as it evolved over the years.

Years ago (in 1988) I caught one episode of The Munsters Today (directed by Munsters guest-star Bonnie Franklin) and wondered why the house they used was "only a model".
Either it wasn't available or the show didn't have the greenbacks to re-dress the orginal house. (From what I remember I'd have to vote for the latter... yeech! That show was like a high-school play version of the B & W show.)

1967 Universal Post Cards
The year after the Musters wrapped production Universal released a set of postcards that shows what appears to be Grandpa's TV dungeon set with a Herman/Frankenstein Monster dummy strapped to the examination table. Other shots showed a Phantom of the Opera-clone menacing both the dummy and a somewhat grabby tourista. Way too cool!

Lastly, these two pics look like tourist fotos taken of the same set, but they blow up big if you click on 'em!

Time o' yer life, eh kids?

That's about it for this year so Happy Halloween folks!
--and big thanks go out to all things Universal Studios, past and present.

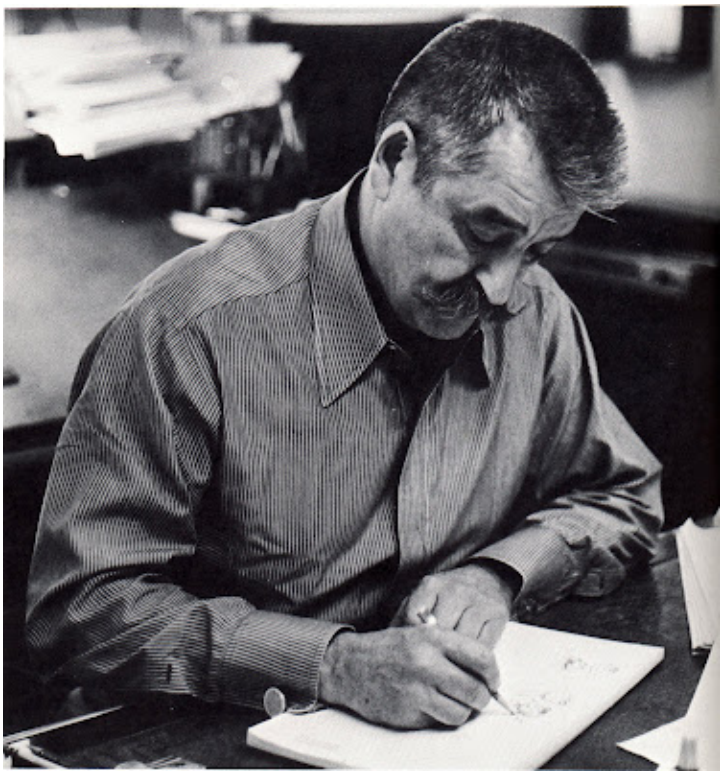
Labels: Al Lewis, Butch Patrick, Color, Fred Gwynne, George Barris, Hot Rods, Mockingbird Lane, The Munsters, Universal Studios, Yvonne DeCarlo

posted by c. martin croker at 10:38 pm | 5 comments

saturday, september 06, 2008

R. I. P. Bill Melendez

Ah, Linus and the hallowed pumpkin patch. It's with some bitter irony that my first Halloween related post of the season is a sad one.



Last Tuesday the animation world lost another heavy hitter... this time it's longtime Warner Brothers Cartoon and classic CBS-TV Peanuts Special director Bill Melendez.

From the Boston Globe:

SANTA MONICA, Calif. - Bill Melendez, the animator who gave life to Snoopy, Charlie Brown, and other "Peanuts" characters in scores of movies and TV specials, has died.

He was 91.

Mr. Melendez died Tuesday at St. John's Hospital, according to publicist Amy Goldsmith.

Mr. Melendez's nearly seven decades as a professional animator began in 1938 when he was hired by Walt Disney Studios and worked on Mickey Mouse cartoons and classic animated features such as "Pinocchio" and "Fantasia."

He went on to animate TV specials such as "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and was the voice of Snoopy, who never spoke but issued expressive howls, sighs, and sobs.

Mr. Melendez was born in 1916 in Hermosillo in the Mexican state of Sonora.

He moved with his family to Arizona in 1928 and then to Los Angeles in the 1930s, attending the Chouinard Art Institute.

Mr. Melendez took part in a strike that led to the unionization of Disney artists in 1941, and later moved to Warner Bros., where he worked on Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, and Daffy Duck shorts.

In 1948, Mr. Melendez left Warner Bros., and over the next 15 years worked as a director and producer on more than 1,000 commercials and movies for United Productions of America, Playhouse Pictures, and John Sutherland Productions.

At United Productions, he helped animate "Gerald McBoing-Boing," which won the 1951 Academy Award for best cartoon short.

Mr. Melendez met "Peanuts" creator Charles M. Schulz in 1959 while creating Ford Motor Co. TV commercials featuring Peanuts characters.

The two became friends and Mr. Melendez became the only person Schulz authorized to animate his characters.

Mr. Melendez founded his own production company in 1964, and with his partner, Lee Mendelson, went on to produce, direct, or animate some 70 "Peanuts" TV specials, four movies, and hundreds of commercials.

The first special was 1965's "A Charlie Brown Christmas." The show reportedly worried CBS because it broke so much new ground for a cartoon: It lacked a laugh track, used real children as voice actors, had a jazz score, and included a scene in which Linus recited lines from the New Testament.

The show was a ratings success, however, and has gone on to become a Christmastime perennial.

Mr. Melendez created Emmy-winning specials based on the cartoon characters Cathy and Garfield, and was involved in animated versions of the Babar the elephant books and the C.S. Lewis book "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

He also was co-nominee for an Academy Award in 1971 for the music for "A Boy Named Charlie Brown."

His productions earned some 19 Emmy nominations, including six awards.

Mr. Melendez leaves his wife, Helen; two sons, Steven and Rodrigo, a retired Navy rear admiral; six grandchildren; and 11 great-grandchildren.

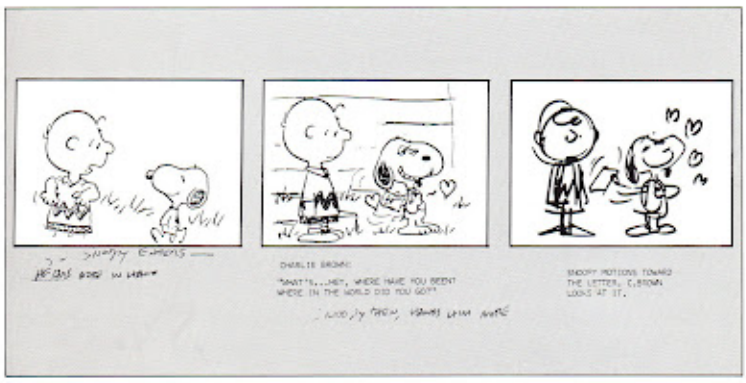
Bill could've never met Charles Schultz and still have had what many would consider a full career. After toiling on some of the best-loved works in the Disney canon he really came into his own at Warner Brothers. Bill was not merely an animator at Warners, He worked in the Bob Clampett animation unit (credited as J.C. Melendez) and produced some of the funniest cartoons ever made including *Wagon Heels, Book Revue, Baby Bottleneck, Kitty Kornered, The Great Piggy Bank Robbery,* and *The Big Snooze*.

After Clampett's departure he worked for both Art Davis' and Bob McKimson's unit on a ton more cartoons featuring Warner Brothers full stable of characters. But it wasn't until after the first few Peanuts Specials aired that he got such notoriety even my mom knew his name.

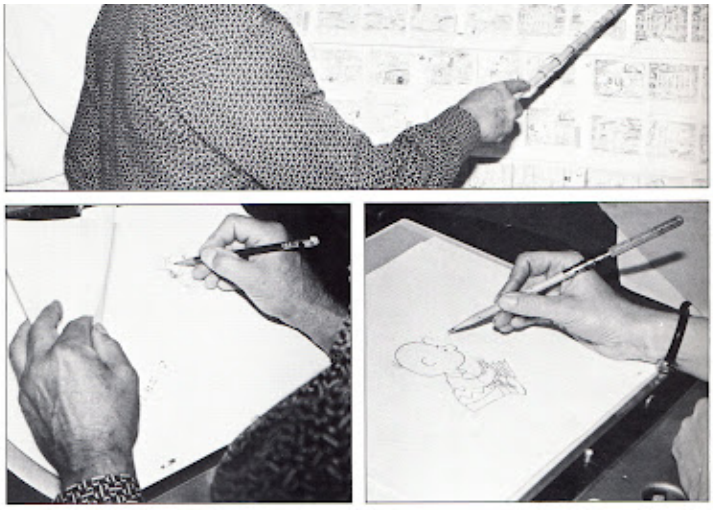
So here's some vintage shots and insights to the Melendez studio production process during their Peanuts production heyday... a little ditty we'll call:

"**It's Old School Animation, Charlie Brown**!"

At the start of any Peanuts production the action and the dialogue were always dictated by the comic strip's creator Charles "Sparky" Schultz. Then Bill Melendez would produce a storyboard (below).



When finished, the storyboard was pinned up so the directors could make sure it all flowed properly. In the photo below Bill goes over the storyboard with co-director Phil Roman (of *Film Roman Studios*) in discussion on how to plot a particular scene.

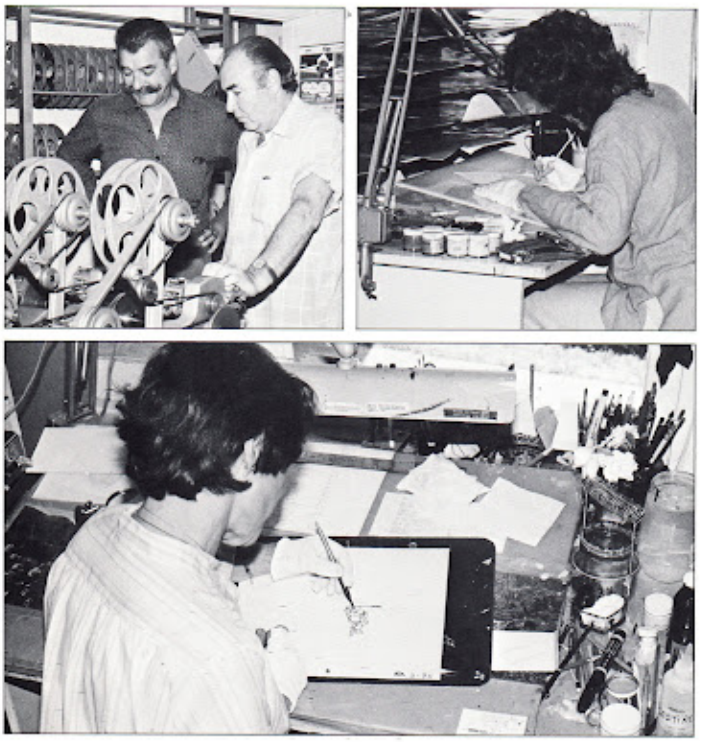


Animators now followed the storyboard --with direction from Melendez-- and start to create the many pencil sketches of characters and actions. Thousand of these sketches will be prepared for the "pencil test" reel, which shows the action in it's roughest form.

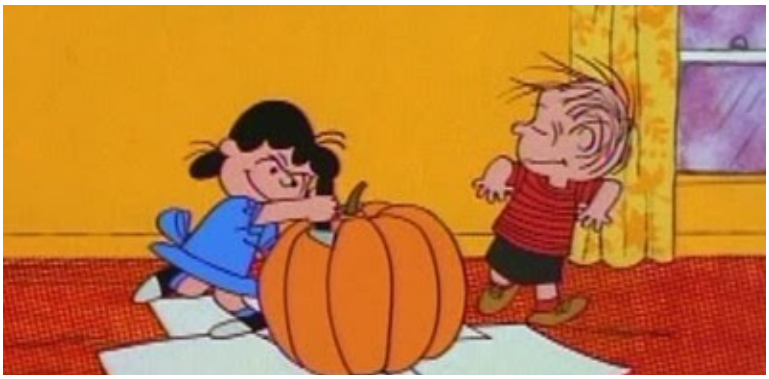
Once the final storyboard was approved, the entire soundtrack would be recorded, with Lee Mendelson directing the voices up in Northern California and Bill directing in Southern California.

Many folks don't know that in addition to his talents as director, Bill also provided the voice of Snoopy. (He's actually recording Snoopy in the above left photo.) Yeah, okay... Snoopy didn't talk per se, (unless you count the off-putting caterwauling of Cam Clarke in *Snoopy The Musical*) but he did laugh, growl, howl, cry and go "Bleah!" a lot. Next, (above right) the animation exposure sheets (or X-sheets) were made up by Bill. In short, he transposed the dialogue from the sound track by means of these sheets and incorporated mouth and facial movements as well as actions for each character, and how many frames of film it all needed to take. These sheets were then handed off to the animators, with each character's actions and movements already spelled out.

Next, one sketch at a time would be photographed and then all the animated action was checked --in pencil-- on a Movieola (ah, look it up). Editor Roger Donley and Bill (below left) carefully check the character mouth movements and action before committing to ink and paint. Once the pencil tests were approved, the hand-inking of every pencil sketch began (below right). The inking of which required perfectly consistent lines and was a long painstaking and under-appreciated process.



The inking (and subsequent painting) was done on transparent acetate cels so that these drawings could be eventually be placed over scenic layouts which provided a background for the animated characters. (Yes, boys and girls... it was the dark ages. No computers with flash or after effects programs around to do the hard, dirty, boring or thankless work.)

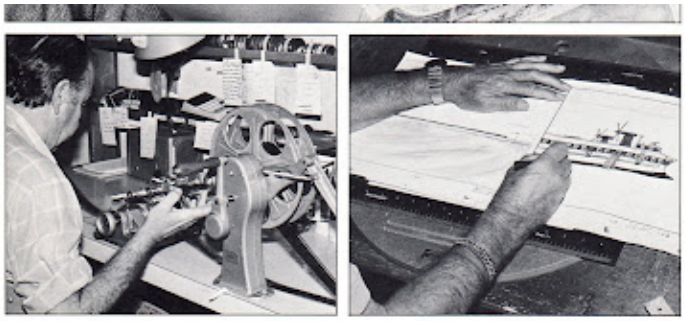


Jigsaw Pumpkin: "...When it comes to the nitty-gritty, Lucy shoves in her knife..."

(Below left) A color model sheet was used for each of the characters to help the painters maintain consistency throughout the production. After the inking was completed, the cel was tuned over and the demanding task of hand painting each of the inked acetate cels began. Usually ten to fifteen minutes was needed to complete the painting of an individual cel.

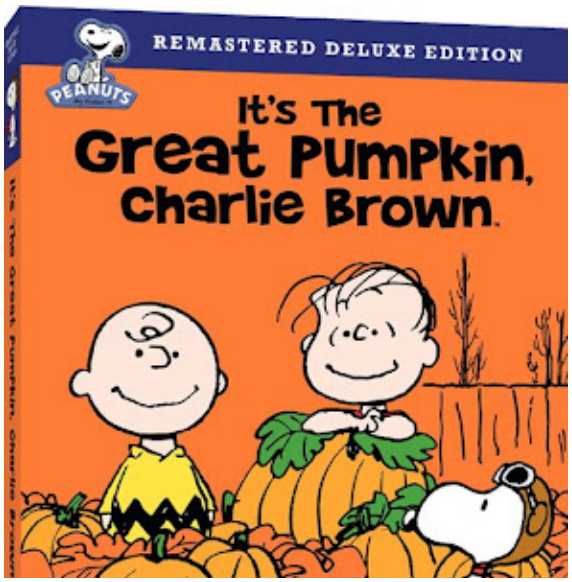
When the inking and painting for an entire scene was complete, the cels were laid one frame at a time over the corresponding backgrounds, and cameraman Nick Vasu photographed the final pictures on color 35mm movie film (above).

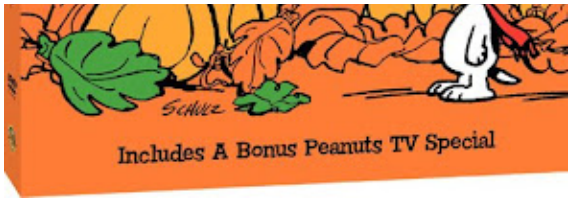
Meanwhile up in Northern California, the musical composers and directors (seen here with Charles Schultz - Judy Mansen, left, and Ed Bogas, right) were creating the musical score for the show.



Finally the editors would take the sound track, including dialogue, sound effects and music, and match it perfectly to the picture... And somehow, after six to nine months of this effort a television special would miraculously appear! Man, they sure don't make 'em like that any more!

Ladies and Gentlemen, Bill Melendez has left the building.
How EERILY coincidental that he would do so on the very same day that the "Remastered Deluxe Edition" DVD of "*It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*" hits the store shelves. Pretty Halloweeny. (I haven't seen this release yet but I hope to God they've corrected all the miserable single-frame animation compression issues that have plagued the Previous Peanuts releases on DVD.) Godspeed Bill. You will be missed.





And by the way --here's the "*Great Pumpkin*" DVD new box art. A new for a 1966 TV special --that's been in wide release --in various formats-- for years now... and still most Atlanta BestBuy stores are already sold out of 'em.

And if that doesn't make your head spin --consider Linus in his oh-so-sincere Pumpkin Patch, and try not to think that this Halloween will be it's 42nd(!) annual airing ...and that in the real world Linus of 1966 would be turning 50 this year.

Big Thanks for this post go out to The Bill Melendez family, and The Boston Globe.

Labels: animator, Bill Melendez, Bob Clampett, Charles M. Schultz, Charlie Brown, Great Pumpkin, Linus, Peanuts, Snoopy, The Red Baron

posted by c. martin croker at 4:34 am | 2 comments